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Hamilton Jordan's Mission Impossible

CRISIS: The Last Year of the Carter Presidency. By Hamilton Jordan. Putnam. 431 pp. \$16.95

By ERIC ROULEAU

THIS BOOK might have been a best seller if it had been published a year ago, before the public lost interest in the Iranian-American crisis. The author, Hamilton Jordan, was then famous as much for his tumultuous private life as for the central role he played in the secret negotiations attempting to free the American hostages in Tehran.

Even today, *Crisis* will cause quite a stir. After so many other accounts, here at last is the first record of the tragedy that played so large a role in President Carter's de-

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feat written by an eyewitness who, in addition, was one of the president's closest advisers and his confidant. I can report that on closing the book I felt a certain letdown, but no regret for having read it.

Hamilton Jordan—despite his personal involvement, the masses of secret documents in his possession and the direct evidence he obtained from other actors in the drama—does not make any staggering revelations and leaves numerous questions unanswered. The aperture of his camera is half open and his depth of field is shallow, but his perspective is fascinating. He never stops wandering in the offices and corridors of the White House, pausing to take physical and psychological portraits that make one of the most exciting episodes in the recent history of the United States come alive “from the inside.” *Crisis* reads like a thriller and although the reader already knows the ending, Jordan's book, written as a diary, is lively, fast-paced and holds the reader in suspense until the very end.

We could have guessed that “the last year of the Carter presidency” would really deal only with the hostage crisis. It was a trying year, since Carter, with Jordan at his side, was fighting simultaneously on two fronts, one in Iran and the other at home—his campaign for reelection. But the battle with the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had to be won in order to guarantee victory at the polls. So Hamilton Jordan devoted himself almost entirely to the secret negotiations with Tehran.

The first big letdown: Jordan does not clear up the many inconsistencies which have always intrigued those who, like this reviewer, closely followed the unfolding crisis. The former White House chief of staff was not a foreign policy expert, but it was to him that Carter entrusted one of the most crucial missions of his presidential term. Jordan knew nothing, or almost nothing, about Iran and its history, of the atrocities committed under the Shah's rule or of the struggle for power that was unfolding

at the heart of the Khomeini regime. He didn't know anything about the psychology of the Iranian people, let alone those with whom he was hoping to negotiate. Worse, he just wasn't interested. All he cared about—in an honorable if simplistic way—was his scheme to obtain the release of the hostages.

Another inconsistency: he chose as intermediaries—under conditions which were not quite as he describes them—two men whom he hardly held in high esteem. One of them was the French “leftist” lawyer, Christian Bourguet, whose sympathy for the Iranian revolution Jordan naturally didn't share. The other was Hector Villalon, an Argentine “businessman” with a controversial past, whom the CIA portrayed as an “opportunist,” a terrorist arrested for kidnapping and “perhaps even a scoundrel.” Jordan decided not to show the CIA's report on Villalon to Carter, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance or Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Hal Saunders. Although he writes that “Bourguet looks awful,” Jordan dazzled his two partners by bringing them to the White House to make them known to President Carter.

Why did Jordan trust these two men, with whom he could not communicate (Jordan spoke neither French nor Spanish; the intermediaries did not know English), who had only a superficial knowledge of Iran, and whose only claim to fame was knowing Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, then the Iranian foreign minister (who was executed September 16 for “high treason”)?

Jordan does justice neither to Ghotbzadeh nor to the two intermediaries by portraying them more as accomplices than as adversaries. Ghotbzadeh is portrayed as an opponent of Khomeini's policies, while Bourguet and Villalon, his friends, are advocates of the American cause. The negotiations are carried on not as if they were between two parties in conflict but as if between allies who have agreed to work out a face-saving solution. They agree on some “scenarios” (Jordan's word) which allow the liberation of the hostages without the United States having to pay the political price demanded by Khomeini and the Islamic students holding the American diplomats captive. Unfortunately for them, the Ayatollah Khomeini was not taken in by the machinations of Ghotbzadeh (and occasionally of the former Iranian president Abolhassan Bani-Sadr), Bourguet, Villalon and Jordan—all united in their desire to reestablish good relations between Iran and the United States.

I feel that it was as a result of their collective miscalculation that the negotiations failed. One factor was their conviction that the moderate faction at the heart of the Khomeini regime held a significant degree of power, something that numerous foreign observers in Tehran knew to be manifestly false.

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